

NARRATOR: Hessel, Ken

INTERVIEWER: Troy Reeves

DATE: March 29, 2001

LOCATION: Boise, Idaho

PROJECT: Smokejumping/Forest Fire Fighting

Tape

Counter

Summary

000	Introduction.
010	Hessel gave an overview of his life, including where he grew up, where he moved to (his father worked for the United States Forest Service), and where he attended school. Hessel also talked about some of his early jobs, such as his work for an Idaho timber protective association and for the Forest Service.
060	He told the interviewer about how he became acquainted with the smokejumpers and how he received an appointment to be a smokejumper in the summer of 1958. Hessel jumped on fires from 1958 through 1962, and he received a degree from Oregon State University in 1963.
085	Hessel explained how he became involved with the Central Intelligence Agency. He worked for the CIA from 1963 to 1975. After leaving the CIA, he returned to the Forest Service, working on forests in Oregon from 1975 through his retirement in 1994. He spoke about his last job when he worked at LaGrande, Oregon, at the Regional Fire Cache.
125	Hessel explained how he became involved with the Clearwater Timber Protective Association and what jobs he did for that association, including piling slash and operating a caterpillar tractor. He mentioned his hourly wage and his move from the association to the Forest Service job, on the Payette National Forest, the next summer. Hessel described the numerous aspects of his trail crew job on the Payette National Forest in the summer of 1957.
190	During the 1960s Hessel, along with other smokejumpers, worked for the CIA in Southeast Asia. Hessel offered his opinions on why smokejumpers were recruited to work in Southeast Asia. Hessel gave an overview of America's involvement in Asia (as well as other locations in the world) fighting communism and talked about other smokejumpers that worked for the CIA.
260	Hessel talked about the Hmong people in Laos that the CIA helped in the Hmong's fight against the North Vietnamese and other Laotians. Hessel again offered an overview of why the CIA became involved in Thailand

and Laos. He also talked about how the Laotian government in the present day have tried to eliminate the Hmong from Laos.

335 Jane Hamilton-Merritt has written a book among the Hmong, called *Tragic Mountains*. Hessel talked about the book, including his opinions about Hamilton-Merritt's hypotheses. He continued to talk about current-day peril for the Hmong in Laos; he compared to genocide in other parts of the world. He also continued his overview of the events in the 1970s that led to the America's removal in Laos.

445 Jerry Daniels worked for the CIA, and he worked in Thailand after the end of the Vietnam War. Hessel offered his memories of Daniels, who was killed in Thailand in early 1980s. He also talked more about Hamilton-Merritt's book and other former smokejumpers who worked for the CIA.

500 **END OF SIDE ONE**
TAPE ONE SIDE TWO

000 Hessel talked about training that he and Tommy "Shep" Johnson did in Thailand for the PARU. He then showed the interviewer a picture of Americans and Thai people training in Laos. He talked about how various groups helped the Hmong both in Laos and in Thailand.

035 Hessel furnished more of his memories about Jerry Daniels, specifically how Daniels helped some Hmong to immigrate to the United States.

080 Hessel said that until two smokejumpers from McCall lost their lives no one knew about the smokejumpers working for the CIA. He said that the smokejumpers that went overseas told other jumpers that they spent the non-fire season working in the mines in Arizona. Once John "Tex" Lewis and Darrell Eubanks were killed in Southeast Asia, people began to find out more about these smokejumpers' non-summer job.

100 According to Hessel, the people who worked for the CIA would provide names of probable recruits to the CIA. The CIA would contact these jumpers to ask if they wanted to join.

130 Hessel married John "Tex" Lewis' sister, Leah. Hessel talked about knowing "Tex" and meeting his sister, Leah. When Leah came through Idaho, while "Tex" was alive, Hessel did not meet her. It was after "Tex" died and when Hessel was living in Arizona when he finally met Leah.

175 Hessel spoke, in detail, about the courtship of Leah Lewis, who eventually became his wife. The courtship began in Arizona and moved to California. Hessel told her that he would take a vacation to California, where Leah moved to, or McCall, Idaho, to go fishing. He decided to go

to California to see Leah. He proposed to her after the third date. They have been married for nearly thirty-five years. He spent most of the first years of the marriage in Thailand or Laos, working for the CIA.

355 When Hessel began with the smokejumpers in 1958, he began “ned” training. He explained, in detail, about the physical training involved to become a smokejumper, including how to jump from the plane and what equipment jumpers carried while exiting the plane.

465 Hessel, while talking about physical training, told a story about another smokejumper, Dick Terry, who lost two fingers in an accident. Terry fell from a ladder during training because of his missing two fingers.

500 **END OF SIDE TWO**
TAPE TWO SIDE ONE

000 [No introduction.] Hessel was training behind Terry, and when Terry fell into a slough, Hessel almost fell, because he was laughing so hard. He continued to describe the various aspects of physical training, including hiking and using the “torture rack.” He also talked about jumping from the back of the moving pickup to practice landing and climbing trees to practicing rescuing equipment from a tree.

050 Hessel talked about removing phone lines from the trees in the forest when they started using radios. The jumper who accompanied Hessel fell from a tree while removing a phone line and broke his leg. Hessel took the jumper back to McCall, and then returned with another jumper to remove the phone line.

090 After seven practice jumps, the neds then hiked several miles racing either each other, or the clock. Then, according to Hessel, they could jump on fires.

110 Hessel talked about his first fire jump in Hells Canyon. He then talked, in great detail, about his most memorable jump, which was also in Hells Canyon. He and another smokejumper, Mike Dayley, jumped into Hells Canyon to fight a fire. They only had one gallon of water between the two of them, because one canister of water broke. They put the fire out quickly, but another fire in the canyon filled the area with smoke, so a helicopter could not pick up Hessel and Daly. Since neither jumper brought a map, they flipped a coin and walked up the Snake River in Hells Canyon for approximately nine miles before they saw another person. This multi-day journey included a trip past the proposed site of the current Hells Canyon Dam.

They eventually made it to the end of the road on the Idaho side of the river where they found a shack with two old men out on the porch. The men gave them a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and Hessel and Daly walked another seven miles to a fire camp for the Kenny Creek fire, which was the fire that was causing the smoke to cover the canyon. Hessel continued to talk about the walk to the fire camp, including walking through a tunnel teeming with rattlesnakes. When they made it to the fire camp, the people at the camp fed them and drove them to Cooper on top of the Kleinschmidt Grade, where they met with someone from the McCall camp. At Cooper they talked to a cowboy, who said that Hessel and Daly had walked right by his cabin, which had plenty of food and water.

485

END OF SIDE ONE
END OF INTERVIEW

NAMES AND PLACE INDEX

Beasley, Ray
Catlin, Del [Francis]
Central Intelligence Agency [CIA]
Chamberlain Basin, Idaho
Clearwater Timber Protective Association
Cold Meadows, Idaho
Cooper, Idaho
Daly, Mike
Daniels, Jerry
Eagle Bar
Eubanks, Darrell
Granite Creek Ridge (Idaho)
Hale, Glen
Hamilton-Merritt, Jane
Hells Canyon
Hessel, Leah (nee Lewis)
Hmong people [Laos]
Horn, “Dub”
Intermountain Aviation
Johnson, Miles
Johnson, Tommy “Shep”
Kenny Creek fire (~1960)
Kleinschmidt Grade, Idaho
LaGrande, Oregon
Laos
Lewis, John “Tex”
Lick Creek summit (Idaho)
Marana, Arizona
McCall, Idaho
Oregon State University
Orofino, Idaho
PARU [police aerial reinforcement unit]
Payette National Forest
Peterson, Richard “Paperlegs”
Sevy, Jay
Snake River
Terry, Dick
Thailand
Tibet
Tragic Mountains (Jane Hamilton-Merritt’s book)
United States Forest Service
Vietnam

NARRATOR: Hessel, Ken

INTERVIEWER: Troy Reeves

DATE: May 1, 2001

LOCATION: LaGrande, Oregon

PROJECT: Smokejumping/Forest Fire Fighting

Tape

Counter	Summary
000	Introduction.
010	Hessel mentioned the importance of flipping a coin to decide who would do what job. He claimed that any time there was a disagreement about a decision, they would flip a coin to decide what path (or decision) to follow.
030	In terms of rites-of-passage of initiation, Hessel only remembered smokejumpers performing a ritual to “neds” the night before their first jump.
050	Hessel told a story about his first practice jump and a man who trained with him. The person, whose last name was Creswell, trained with the smokejumpers but did not jump from the plane. Hessel found that ironic, because Creswell served in the military in an airborne division. The next person, Wayne Fletcher, jumped from the plane, and Hessel followed him. He continued to discuss how well he did on his first jump, in terms of landing near the target.
100	During that first jump, Hessel said he felt a little fear, but he thought that he just needed to do it. He continued to describe the number of practice jumps (seven) and the fact that after those jumps you could possibly not jump again the rest of the summer. He said that today jumpers could take refresher jumps during the season.
150	With prompting from the interviewer, Hessel talked about a contemporary of his, Stan Tate. He talked about a practice jump where Tate’s main chute did not open. Hessel said that the “neds” trained with “neds” and and veterans trained with veterans, regarding practice jumps.
200	Hessel talked about how during fires, particularly two-man fires, a veteran would work with a “ned.” Hessel continued to discuss the importance of experience, not only with smokejumping, but also with other aspects of his life. For Hessel, experience equaled trust. He also talked about the fire school that first-year fire fighters attended.
270	Hessel told, in detail, about one fire on Cat Creek near the Salmon River. Eight jumpers fought the fire, and they escaped injury when the fire

blew-up and overtook them. The jumpers found safety in either a burned over area or a crag of rocks. He explained how they avoided injury on a different spot on the same fire. They built fire line away from the fire and lit a backfire to finally control the fire. Other forest fire fighters helped contain this fire, and one forest fire fighter died when a rock crushed the truck he was in.

465 **END OF SIDE ONE**
 TAPE ONE SIDE TWO

020 Hessel talked about some other near misses during a fire. He talked about one burning snag that slid down to the river and instantly created a fire along the path of the snag. He offered his opinions about fighting fire at night; Hessel felt that night was the best time to fight a fire. He talked about two events in fire fighting history—Storm King in 1994 and Mann Gulch in 1949 and the differences between fire fighting today and in the 1950s and 1960s when Hessel served as a smokejumper.

090 Smokejumpers, such as “Paperlegs” Peterson, Thad Duel, Tommy “Shep” Johnson, and Wayne Webb, taught Hessel a lot of smokejumping during Hessel’s rookie year. Hessel then said he tried to help “neds” when he became a veteran jumper. He mentioned that good rookie jumpers follow directions quickly and responsibly.

130 With prompting from the interviewer, Hessel explained why smokejumpers work hard, giving “110 percent.” He said that smokejumpers did that because their lives depended on each other working hard and working together.

155 Hessel described the buildings, in detail, at the smokejumper camp in McCall. His strongest memories about the camp dealt with the cook shack; he felt he never ate better than his smokejumping days. Hessel also discussed the non-buildings in the camp, such as the physical training areas. Hessel also talked about how the jumpers got to the airport from the camp and how many jumpers would stay around camp in case of a fire. *[Note: the current camp is located at the airport.]* He said that jumpers could, if necessary, jump out of a plane in groups of eight, ten, or twelve.

275 Hessel talked about one fire near Waterfall Creek near the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Hessel and the others jumped at night due to the weather and two other jumpers from Missoula were in line before them. Hessel remembered this fire, because one jumper landed in a tree and then fell. This jumper narrowly avoided major injury.

370 With prompting from the interview, Hessel described the equipment jumpers carried in their suit and the tools dropped to them on a fire. He

also talked about the food jumpers brought to the fire; Hessel also carried a fishing pole, just in case he could find the time to catch a fish. He said the backpack could hold over 100 pounds of equipment that jumpers could have packed out from the fire if there was no pack string. Hessel mentioned that his longest pack out was 26 miles.

500 **END OF SIDE TWO**
 TAPE TWO SIDE ONE

000 [No introduction.] Hessel talked about the lack of communication during his time as a fire fighter, due to the lack of reliable radios.

020 During a fire smokejumpers followed a certain protocol. Hessel explained what procedures jumpers followed to battle a blaze and how the type of terrain dictated how smokejumpers fought the fire.

090 At certain times when the jumpers flew to the fire, they realized that the fire was bigger than the number of smokejumpers in the plane. Hessel also mentioned that some fires just escaped initial containment, and the jumpers would just get out of the way. They would attack those fires later in the evening.

120 When jumpers contained a fire, they returned to base and followed certain procedures. Hessel described, in detail, what smokejumpers did when they made it to the base.

155 When a smokejumper was not high on the jump list, they worked on projects outside of McCall. Hessel described some of these projects, including the work (and play) involved while they “peeled poles” near Thorn Creek. He also talked about maintaining the airstrip near Chamberlain Basin.

225 When a smokejumper was high on the jump list, he worked on projects around the base. Hessel talked about these projects, which he claimed were mainly maintenance of the buildings and area within the base. He mentioned the work done in the parachute loft to keep the parachutes in working condition.

275 At five o’clock the smokejumpers’ day ended (if they were not on a fire). Hessel described what the jumpers did in and around McCall after working hours.

305 With prompting from the interviewer, Hessel described McCall in the late 1950s/early 1960s. He talked about Brown’s sawmill. He also furnished a visual snapshot of the various businesses and sites in and around the town, including the restaurants, bars, and hotels, and empty lots. For example,

he could have bought a lot near the Shore Lodge in McCall for \$700; he wished he could have procured those lots.

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END OF SIDE ONE
END OF INTERVIEW

NAMES AND PLACES INDEX

Alpine Room (McCall, Idaho)
Brown's Mill (McCall, Idaho)
Burgdorf, Idaho
Cat Creek (Idaho)
Chamberlain Basin (Idaho)
Daly, Mike
Daly, Pat
Donnelly, Bob
Duel, Thad
Fletcher, Wayne
Ford's Café (McCall, Idaho)
Foresters' Club (McCall, Idaho)
Graham, Dick
Hells Canyon
Hotel McCall (McCall, Idaho)
Johnson, Miles
Johnson, Tommy "Shep"
Krassel Ranger Station
Mann Gulch fire (1949, Montana)
McCall, Idaho
Moore, Larry
Payette River
Payne, Bill
Peterson, "Paperlegs"
Ramsay, Stanley
Rasmussen, John
Rosselli, Carl
Salmon River
Shore Lodge (McCall, Idaho)
Smith, Ken (Kenneth)
South Canyon Fire (Glenwood Springs, Colorado)
Storm King fire (1994, Colorado)
Tate, Stan
The Cellar (McCall, Idaho)
The Dog House (McCall, Idaho)
Thorn Creek (Idaho)
Warren, Idaho
Waterfall Creek (Idaho)
Webb, Wayne
Williams, "Woody" (Woodrow)
Yacht Club (McCall, Idaho)